


Metro to Portland: Let's talk trash

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Film fest, other events ponder future of waste management



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Cracked Pots board member Amy Wilson inspects a trunk at the Metro Central Transfer Station to see if it can be refurbished and resold.

You might have noticed a lot of trash talk happening around you.

Not just with sports. The Metro regional government launched a major effort this spring to get people thinking about where their trash goes — and, in the larger picture, about the region's future of waste disposal.

The Let's Talk Trash series has been fairly creative and engaging, beyond the standard open house. Other public agencies, take note.

The series continues this month with a film festival about trash. Part of the Northwest Film Center's 41st annual Filmmakers' Festival, the Let's Talk Trash film festival will include five 10-minute films about garbage made by local filmmakers.

The event is set for 6 p.m. Nov. 10 at the Portland Art Museum.

Metro had put out a call to local filmmakers to explore the role of garbage, and received more than a dozen submissions, says Ken Ray, a Metro spokesman.

Five finalist films were chosen to be shown, and the audience will pick the winning film. The top prize is \$500. The filmmakers and audience will engage in a discussion afterward.

Also this month, the Metro Council will hold a work session to consider the future of Metro South Transfer Station in Oregon City, which Metro has operated for more than 30 years.

The facility is well-used and there are great satisfaction ratings from the construction crews and people who haul stuff to the station to dump, Ray says.

The challenge is that it's just a 9-acre site, and it's handling more than it was designed for.

Looking toward the future, Metro has engaged consultants and come up with different configuration options for the site.

The Metro Council will look into those options at the work session, set for 2 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 18, at Metro, 600 N.E. Grand Ave., in Portland.

Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Recyclable goods are sorted and retrieved at Metro's Central Transfer Station before the rest is loaded into trailers destined for the Arlington Landfill.

Clock on contract is ticking

So why all the trash talk now?
Metro's contract with Waste



Management expires in 2019, which prompted Metro to begin its Let's Talk Trash series this spring.

Rather than just host informational open houses that might attract a handful of do-gooders, these public events were designed to appeal to Portlanders' creative and academic interests.

There was an educational arts event with Milagro Theatre in May. In August, Metro held its annual "Glean" art show of works made from recycled trash in partnership with the nonprofit Cracked Pots, one of the few groups allowed by contract to collect materials from the Metro Central Transfer Station.

Each year, Cracked Pots puts out a call to their "waste shed," as they call it, for artists who want to participate.

This year 80 applied, and five were chosen. Artists were given five months and a \$2,000 stipend to glean their materials and create 10 pieces of art. The sculptures, collages and bas-relief works were on display for a month in August at Disjecta studio in North Portland.

At the same time, the space next door, Nisus Gallery, featured a garbage-centric solo show, "Waste Not," by Portland artist Natalie Sept. Known for her profiles of everyday workers, her series of Recology employees sorting through garbage puts a personal face on the issue.

Also with an emphasis on entertainment-while-learning, Stan Jones, environmental compliance manager for the Port of Portland, spoke at a Nerd Night event in May about how the Portland International Airport handles its waste.

Held at the Clinton Street Theater each month, the Nerd Night series takes on newsy issues like the Cascade Subduction Zone and the neuroscience of racism — but makes it less geeky with an "inebriated, salacious, yet deeply academic vibe."

In June, another Nerd Night event brought Marco J. Castaldi, associate professor of chemical engineering from The City College of New York, to talk about ways to get more out of the waste stream.

He's working on emerging technologies to capture energy from garbage, including the process of gasification, one of the options Metro will consider as an alternative to dumping the region's waste in a landfill.

Then, in July, Ed Humes, author of the 2013 book "Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair With Trash," came to speak at Portland State University and at the City Club of Portland.

In his book, Humes estimates that the average American produces 102 tons of garbage during their lifetime, and that people squander about \$50 billion in reclaimable materials rolled to the curb.

Humes praises Portland green sensibilities and says its 59 percent diversion rate from the landfill is an example for other cities to follow. But he also challenges Portland to do better: "... all the burning, landfilling, recycling and composting does is redirect our 102-ton legacy. How does a town like Portland stop making so much garbage in the first place?

"Like so many communities across America," he writes, "Portland is not sure yet what magic mix of technology, technique, inducements, prohibitions and exhortations to consumers to change their behavior should be attempted in the hope of actually reducing the 102 tons we are destined to leave behind, rather than merely shuffling it to some other form of treatment. But uncertainty or not, the deadline to decide is approaching."

Humes outright asks if Portland can emulate Copenhagen, Denmark, where residents produce half as much trash as Americans — just as Portland has emulated that city's bicycle culture.

Denmark, Germany, Austria, Japan and the Netherlands have made burning trash a key part of their energy and waste strategies, Humes' book explains.

As Portlanders know, however, no big change comes easy here. The future of waste management in Portland will

likely be hugely controversial, since it's a balance of convenience, the environment and economy.

Whatever happens, says Bruce Philbrick, Metro transfer station operations manager, "We don't want to rest on our laurels. It's an ongoing effort to look at that (waste) stream and say, 'What can we do better?'"



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Amy Wilson grabs a piece of art created with materials at ReClaim It!, a haven for DIYers and artists looking for retro cool, sustainable materials.

Input sought on options

Metro wants residents to weigh in on its Solid Waste Roadmap — the long-term waste management plan for the region.

The Metro Council discussed 14 options at a work session in July, and that list has since been whittled down to five.

Two of those options will move forward early next year, after Metro staff present what they've learned. Here are the five options:

- The process of burning garbage is gasification, which some in Portland oppose because of the chemical emissions produced.

But Metro staff say the process has gotten 1,000 times cleaner than 30 years ago and 10 times cleaner than 10 years ago. Items like glass and metal are removed

so the trash may be heated to a temperature of at least 1,800 degrees, with controlled amounts of oxygen to prevent combustion.

The resulting product is a gas containing mostly carbon monoxide, hydrogen and methane, which can be further "cleaned" or "scrubbed" to a suitable grade for use in an engine to generate electricity or as a feedstock to produce chemicals.

- Anaerobic digestion uses bacteria to break down biodegradable material and produces a biogas (mostly methane and carbon dioxide).

The biogas can be cleaned for use in a direct combustion engine to produce electricity, cleaned and compressed for vehicle fuel, or cleaned for sale into a local natural gas pipeline.

- Both gasification and anaerobic digestion would require an advanced materials recovery facility, where certain materials would need to be removed for reuse or the landfill before the remainder can be processed.

There's no existing advanced materials recovery facility in the region, but Metro will look at what it would take to establish one.

- A refuse-derived fuel system prepares garbage to be used for new fuels for power plants or other industrial purposes. Certain types of garbage, like plastics, textiles, paper and wood waste, are prepared for combustion on- or off-site through a conversion technology that requires a prepared feedstock.

- The simplest and probably cheapest option is to continue sending garbage to the landfill, where the decaying waste emits methane gases.

Gift show

ReClaim It! will host "Off the Wall," a holiday gift show from Nov. 14 through Dec. 21.

Twelve artists have been working to create quirky and artful gifts made from recycled materials such as jewelry, wood, mosaics, mixed media, painting and plastic. They'll be on hand to meet shoppers and help with gift selections.

An opening reception for the show is set for 5-8 p.m. Nov. 14, at ReClaim It!, 1 N. Killingsworth St. For more:



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Amy Wilson is one of many 'gleaners' who find gratification in scavaging items for reuse. As an artist, she finds beauty in the possibilities.

City shop finds new uses for old 'junk'

Leave it to Portland to put a bird on everything — even its trash.

One of the first things you see at the Metro Central Transfer Station is the large bird cage, to hold the falcons and other raptors that are brought in to scare away the crows and Western gulls that try to circle the mountains of waste.

Here, at this odoriferous site in an otherworldly part of industrial Northwest Portland, is where the transfer station's operator — Recology — sorts through 575 tons of waste daily from homes and businesses in the region.

Ninety percent of that is loaded onto a fleet of Walsh Trucking trailers and shipped 150 miles away to the Columbia Ridge Landfill in Arlington, in eastern Oregon. Between Metro Central and Metro South transfer stations, that's 50 to 55 trailers per day, Monday through Friday, each with 34 tons of garbage. The trailers return empty.

Ten percent of the Metro Central's waste, however, avoids being shipped to Arlington through the recycling, recovery and composting efforts Recology contracts out.

Those "recoverables" come from the dry waste stream, which does not include organics or everyday household garbage. In September, Metro Central handled 4,374 tons of dry waste, around 40 percent of which was recovered.

That's risen from around 19 percent, before Recology began its contract in 2010.

What is not recovered is loaded into the compactor and hauled to the landfill.

Between Metro Central and Metro South in Oregon City, the rate of diversion is up to 60 percent, significantly higher than any, if not all, other regions in the nation, says Bruce Philbrick, manager of transfer station operations at Metro Central. "When it comes to recycling, our region's really doing a great job," he says. "I know that we're most definitely in the elite."

Still, he says, the Portland region can do better — not just for environmental reasons, but also as protection from health and climate change effects, as well as to save money on a household and business level.

Since 2010, Metro has awarded Recology increasing incentives for the level of "dry waste" they're able to divert from the landfill.

Metro raised the dry waste diversion target from 34 percent to 38 percent and then 40 percent this July.

This rate stands until Recology's \$38 million annual contract ends in March 2017.

What to do with a population's trash is a hot topic nationally as well.

On Oct. 25, The New York Times profiled Rubicon Global, an Atlanta consulting firm that connects businesses with recyclers and online bidders who'll divert "trash" from their waste stream. They approach it primarily as a money-saver for their clients, with environmental responsibility as an added benefit.

Philbrick says Metro uses consultants; there's currently a project underway with Evergreen Engineering of Eugene to explore options for the region's wood waste.

Recology also is looking for a market for hard-to-recover materials like mattresses. About 800 to 1,000 mattresses per month are dumped at Metro's two transfer stations, posing a challenge to get them onto the conveyor belt, into the compactor and onto the trucks. "It's not an easy material for us to handle, by any stretch," Philbrick says.

Besides, the mattress components are completely recyclable: metal spring sets, foam, cotton batting and wood box springs.

Yet, no organization has been willing to cover their labor and equipment costs to disassemble them by relying on the revenue from the mattress parts alone. They need an additional revenue source. A couple of nonprofit organizations have expressed an interest in processing the mattresses from the two transfer stations.

"It's been a really vexing issue," Philbrick says. "We're spending a lot of time exploring opportunities."

Philbrick says that doesn't let residents and businesses off the hook.

"We need to aggressively recycle, aggressively place organics in the proper container, step back and embrace this whole concept of waste reduction. That needs to be our first line of defense."

Buy durable goods

The sight of all of the garbage as it's dumped at the transfer station is a vision to behold.

There are bicycles, mattresses, couches and coffee tables poking out of the mountains of rubble. There are window panes and patio sets, microwaves and Styrofoam blocks, and piles and piles of scrap wood and flooring samples. There are a few toilets, and yes — even the occasional kitchen sink, tossed after a renovation.

"When we clean it up, it'll be awesome; we'll take a couple screws and we're good," says Amy Wilson, inspecting a decorative wicker end table she pulled from the mountain of trash.

Wilson — a reclaimed materials artist and board vice president of the nonprofit Cracked Pots — toted out the table on a recent day to sell at the new ReClaim It! store on North Killingsworth Street and Williams Avenue.

She and her crew of trained volunteers collect literally a ton of these goods every weekend, sort, clean and sell them to artists, DIYers and the general public.

She peeks closer at one of the items on the trash pile to find a small wooden trunk that looks exotic.

"That's nice," she says, until she turns it over to see a Marshall's price tag for \$29.99.

She laughs. "We know this was cheap, so we never valued it, and we threw it away," she says. "It's easy."

ReClaim It! opened in June to raise awareness of our throwaway culture, even in Portland, she says.

If there's just one message people should take away, it's to buy durable goods.

"A lot of this stuff doesn't need to happen," Wilson says, now touching a cheaply made dresser that was tossed because one drawer didn't fit together anymore. "Pay 50 percent more. If you have to replace it, that's 100 percent more."

Cracked Pots has one of just three Recology contracts to access the site and retrieve what they want.

The others are the ReBuilding Center in North Portland, which focuses on home remodeling materials, and St. Vincent de Paul in Eugene, which retrieves clothing and household items.

Powered mostly by volunteers, those nonprofits manage to divert nearly 17 tons of material for reuse. That's about 1 percent of the total 1,773 tons of total waste material.

Philbrick says that shouldn't downplay the significance of the efforts.

"We're talking about items that have great value — clothing, housewares, furniture, sold at resale prices," he says.

Indeed, ReClaim It! prices are low — skis and snowboards for less than \$5, \$3 bundles of lath and plaster torn from old homes, antique accordions and machine parts, wooden chairs and turn-of-the-century furniture, old lanterns and mysterious metal bits.

A lot of materials get scooped up by local bars and restaurants as sustainable, reclaimed, retro decor.

"It's gorgeous," Wilson says, peering into a small closet full of colorful skis retrieved from the dump. "It would make the coolest gates, chairs, benches. All you've got to do is cut them."

Inspiring recycling

Jane Comerford, board president of Cracked Pots, which runs ReClaim It!, has thought about trash her entire life.

The 72-year-old calls herself a good old-fashioned Dumpster diver, who finds other uses for the perfectly good, forgotten items.

"When I was a teenager, I had a garage sale," she says. "I took stuff out of the basement, and sold a good suit of my father's. Clearly, I was taught to not throw stuff out."

Comerford says she didn't get in trouble for selling the suit. In fact, she was hooked.

Last week she was in Oaxaca, Mexico, volunteering with a Salem-based organization called Friends of Pimpollo.

She helped paint a school building and joined in as people gleaned stuff from the local dump to make their living. They live in shacks that “become quite extensive” with their finds, she says.

“The huge trash mound (several stories high), with pickers scavenging, is on one side of the road, and the community on the other.”

Comerford says necessity is definitely the mother of invention: She saw someone use a hacksaw formed out of a rebar, with two little nails to hold it in place.

“Third-world countries can be our teachers,” she says. “Because we’ve gotten so much, we’ve forgotten the basics.”

At ReClaim It!, she says she hopes to spark people’s consciousness with sample projects around the store to inspire their reuse efforts.

She wants to inspire them to repurpose their things rather than dump them: “What I think would be fabulous is if we put ourselves out of business, quite frankly.”

On Twitter @jenmomanderson

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